

Socialism and Unionism



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It is quite frequently asserted that Socialism is inimical to Unionism. taking that term to mean Trades and Labor Unionism in its several forms. When such an assertion comes from union leaders of high and low degree who, at election times, are found hand in glove with the politicians of the old parties, nothing further need be said. And when it comes from obviously honest and well-intentioned unionists, the briefest of inquiry will invariably reveal the fact that, of even the most elementary principles of Socialism they have not the slightest knowledge.

On the other hand that assertion is vehemently denied and met with the counter claim that Socialism and Unionism have aims and objects in common. Here also will be found either a defective knowledge of Socialism or a hardly creditable desire to curry favor with organized labor.

Only an examination into the objects of the two movements and the causes which have called them

into existence will reveal their relationship, if any, to one another.

The objects of a labor union are to raise the wages, shorten the hours and better the condition generally of its members.

But what are wages? When a worker hires himself to an employer he agrees to work for him, that is, to give him a portion of his time and energy each day in return for a specified sum of money. Hence it is seen that to shorten hours is, by decreasing the quantity of time and energy given, equivalent to raising wages and may be included under that head. Similarly, as wages are, in the long run, not the actual money but the "living" which that money will buy, the betterment of conditions generally may also be included in the general term wages.

We find, then, that the object of the union is to secure for its members a betterment of wages. Wages being, superficially, the sum of money, but, in the last analysis, the living, in exchange for which the worker delivers up to his employer for a specified time his physical energy, in other words his power to labor, or, briefly, his labor-power.

Obviously this living must at least be sufficient to keep the laborer alive from day to day, otherwise the supply of laborers would become rapidly exhausted. Furthermore, on the average it must

be sufficient to make possible the rearing of families in order to provide successive generations of laborers, though in highly developed centres of population this average is considerably reduced by the employment of the whole family who are thus individually enabled to work for less wages as their collective wage is on the average sufficient to meet the necessities of the family.

So much for the minimum wage. The maximum limit of wages is the most the employer can pay and still have a profit, for clearly if the wage rose so high as to eliminate his profit there would be no alternative for him but to shut down his works.

Between this maximum and minimum, wages fluctuate. In newly developed localities where laborers are scarce, wages incline towards the maximum. In older centres, where the supply of laborers is in excess of the demand, wages fall to the minimum, and in extreme cases, below it, so much so that they are insufficient to keep the workers alive in season and out of season without recourse to "charity."

Out of these conditions the labor unions arise, as associations of workers seeking by combination to raise their wages. Their success or failure in this attempt is determined by the difficulty or ease with which their places can be filled if they strike.

In the earlier stages of the wage system of pro-

duction the workers had some advantages in this field. Many circumstances were in their favor. Their employers were numerous so that they could leave the service of one with reasonable prospects of finding employment with another. These employers were in bitter competition with one another and were possessed of small capital only, so that a strike of any duration spelt ruin to any of them; they were, therefore, the more ready to concede their workers' demands. Production in nearly all branches of industry called for more or less skill and training, so that workers could not be so readily found to take the places of strikers. During that period, therefore, the efforts of the unions commanded some measure of success.

With the evolution of industry, however, those days have passed. More and more improved machinery, appliances and processes have taken the place of hand labor. Skill and training have become less and less a necessity, till to-day, in the vast majority of cases, the worker is nothing but a machine tender, a mere automaton keeping step with the exact and unerring motions of a huge mechanism, performing no more than a fractional and subsidiary part in the process of the production of any article, having so little skill that, should he strike, his place can readily be filled from the ranks of the ever-increasing army of hunger-driven unemployed.

At the same time the progressively increasing cost of improved machinery and enlarged plants has called for increased capital, and so the numerous small employers have been displaced by firms and joint stock companies until we have to-day huge corporations owning entire fields of industry and with reserves of capital at their command that enable them to withstand strikes of the most prolonged duration and widest magnitude.

Consequently, except in one or two favored trades where some vestiges of skill and training are still a desideratum, the successes of the labor unions have been few and far between. True, the conservative labor leaders point with pride to the fact that wages have risen, but they are discreetly silent upon the rises in prices of necessities which far out-balances the meagre rise in the money wage. During the last two years, 1908 and 1909, for instance, prices have risen over 11 per cent. yearly, while the average wages have risen less than 7 per cent. in the two years, which shows, not a gain but an actual loss of 15 per cent. in the real wage, the living the money wage will buy.

At the same time the world's productivity is being ever enhanced, the available markets ever contracted, and new peoples with lower standards of life are thrusting their cheaper wares into all the avenues of commerce, so that the army of the

unemployed grows ever greater, the competition for jobs ever fiercer, just as the displacement of human labor by the machine becomes more rapid. Under these circumstances can it be said that the outlook before the unions is anything but gloomy?

It will be seen that the non-success of the labor unions is due to perfectly natural causes which are inevitable consequences of the wage system of production. To the employer, selling his commodities in competition with others, it is essential that these be produced as economically as possible. The incentive to cutting or keeping down wages, to replace hand labor with machine labor, to increase his capital and enlarge his plant is irresistible. He must do these things or be driven from the field of production by his rivals. The contraction of world markets as nation after nation reaches the stage of modern production; the growth of unemployment and its consequent sharpening of the competition for employment; the steady and irresistible rise in prices; all these are the unavoidable and natural consequences of the wage system, due to economic laws inherent in that system. The efforts of the unions are being therefore, directed not only against effects, but against effects which are absolutely inevitable. What measure of success can be expected?

Knowing these things, the Socialist can see the

wastefulness of efforts directed along these lines. Therefore, instead of devoting his energies to attempting to enhance his wages, the price of his labor power, in the face of conditions which render that enhancement impossible, nay, which carry an irresistible tendency towards reducing those wages, directly or indirectly, year by year, he attempts to search out the economic laws governing this system of production and to learn from them the underlying cause which renders these conditions inevitable. The fruits of that search and the logical deductions to be drawn therefrom constitute the Socialist theory and practice.

We find the fact that we must work for ever less and less wages is merely a necessary corollary to the simple fact that we must work for wages. We find that we must work for wages because we have not the necessary implements of production to enable us to work for ourselves. We must, therefore, in order to gain our livelihood, work for those who own these means of production. We cannot employ our own power to labor, we must therefore sell it to those who can employ it. Purchasing our power to labor, to them belongs the fruit of that labor; in it we have no part for we have sold out and receive our portion, at best a meagre living, becoming yearly more meagre.

Thus, by virtue of their ownership of the means

of life our masters can compel us to toil for them upon pain of starvation; compel us to deliver up to them the fruit of our toil, and to receive in return sufficient to sustain us in life from day to day. Wherein we make the humiliating discovery that our lot is but a slight modification of that of the chattel slave; that we are none other than slaves masquerading in the garb of freemen, in that, while we may quit the service of any master, for some master we must toil; that while the master owned the chattel slave for life and must provide for him in season and out of season, our masters own us but for the day, to-morrow we must provide for ourselves as best we can.

Seeking the cause of our enslavement we find it in the ownership by the masters of the means of production, the mills, mines and factories and the avenues of transportation. Owning these they, as a class, command our labor. To them we must sell, in competition with our fellows, our power to labor for a wage, the equivalent of which but a few hours of the day's toil will reproduce. The hours we labor thereafter are the profit of the masters. Out of that unpaid toil are their rent, interest and dividends paid, for to the owners of the means of wealth production belongs the wealth produced.

It follows, therefore, that were the means of

production collectively owned by the workers, to the workers the wealth produced would belong. The fruits of what is now their unpaid toil would then be theirs to use and enjoy. The enhanced productivity due to improved mechanical appliances and chemical processes, the benefits of which accrue now to the masters would accrue then to the workers, to whose ingenuity they are due and by whose effort they are employed. The lessening of the labor needed then, in place of constituting, as now, an ever-pressing peril and an increasing source of hardship and degradation, would, by lessening the necessary hours of work, be but a boon and an easement to the workers. Increased productivity, instead of spelling intensified poverty would but signify enhanced ease and plenty.

But between the workers and the ownership of the means of production everywhere stands the State. If the property of the masters is stolen, restitution and punishment come at the hands of the State. If the ownership of property is in dispute, the State adjudicates. If property is threatened the State, with police and militia, with judiciary and legislature, hastens to its defence. The title deeds to property are written and guaranteed by the State.

The State giveth, the State can take away. It is now the instrument of the masters to preserve

their property. It can become the instrument of the workers to turn that property into their hands.

Now the control of the State is in the hands of the masters. The old political parties represent, if they represent anything, but warring factions of the master class. Whichever party wins to political power neither helps the workers. The politicians reign but, unseen, the capitalists rule. Be he never so honest or well-meaning, the old party politician can but serve Capital, not Labor, whether or not he wills or knows it. By training, education and thought he is the henchman of Capital.

So long as the workers can be beguiled into supporting any of the parties of Capital, that is any party which is not against Capital, Capital is safe, be the victorious party never so fierce in its denunciation of abuses, never so sincere in its professions of sympathy for Labor. While Capitalist ownership is untouched, Capital is master, Labor slave. Only by themselves conquering political power for the purpose of abolishing capitalist ownership of the means of production can the workers ever obtain any easement. They must have the whole loaf or be content with none.

So to the conquest of the State we, of the working class, have set ourselves. Not for honor and glory. Not for personal political advancement. These we might achieve more easily otherwise.

Nor for the love of suffering humanity. But because we know we are slaves; we have lived enslaved long enough and are determined at least to die freemen.

The task we have set ourselves is stupendous but we shall accomplish it. Arrayed against us are all the powers at the command of the master class; their wealth, their press, their colleges and their pulpits. But on our side fight the slow but unswerving forces of evolution, which make our growth uncheckable, our triumph assured.

Capitalism, which seeks to combat us, itself creates us recruits for our ranks, fements our revolt. Capitalism, whose upholders deny the feasibility of the Socialist society, exists for no other end than to prepare the way for that society.

Our forbears were rude, unlettered, unorganized, unintelligent and totally lacking the first principles of cohesion and organization. In a few brief generations Capitalism has gathered us together, educated us, drilled and disciplined us into a huge co-ordinated army of production, given us ideas and aims, interests and aspirations in common.

The means of production, too, were primitive and scattered. It has brought them, so to speak, under one roof and has developed their efficiency many hundred fold. It has organized them ready for our collective ownership, and has imbued us

with the desire to own them, nay, has dictated to us the necessity of owning them, leaving us no alternative but to own them or perish.

• The greatest obstacle in our path is the ignorance of our fellow slaves of their enslaved condition. But that ignorance is being steadily dispelled. Again Capitalism, while in the school and the press it teaches otherwise, in the mine and the mill it repeats our lesson everlastingly, without ceasing, it prepares their minds for our gospel to which they hearken year by year more willingly and in greater numbers. With so able and willing a helper who can deny us the ultimate victory.

Unionism arose under other conditions to meet the needs of the day. It met them but its day is passing. Not without turning the clock backwards can we raise it again to power. But every forward turn of the clock brings us nearer Socialism. We do not seek to accomplish the impossible, to get blood out of a stone, to better our condition within a system whose very existence predicates that our condition must grow worse. We seek only the possible and the only possible remedy. The wage slave's salvation lies in emancipation and in nothing less.

That is the aim and purpose of the Socialist Party. With unionism we have nothing in.

common but a working class membership. But there they are striving, as sellers of wares, for a better price. Here, we are striving, as slaves, for freedom. With the fortitude and tenacity of the working class they are fighting a losing fight. We are fighting a winning one. The more battles they lose, the more recruits we gain.

On the other hand, between the Unions and the Socialist Party, working on different planes, there is little likelihood of conflict, except for the allegiance of the working class, and in this, assured of victory, we can afford to be magnanimous and pass by without vindictiveness their innocuous attacks whether well meant or ill. Their interests lie within the wage system, ours without it. To the Socialist Party their internal affairs are of no concern and of but academic interest. Whatever they do, whether they federate or disintegrate, whether, caged in the iron laws of the wage system, they accept the inevitable, or dash themselves against the stout bars, they will do what they do at the stern bidding of necessity. We can neither help nor hinder them. We can but spread our message among their membership as among the membership of our class generally, trusting Time and capital to bring results.

But can Socialists and Unionists work together? Yes, when Unionists are Socialists, not before.

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